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THE AMERICAN BOY

IMPRESSIONS OF AN ENGLISHMAN

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The ordinary human boy is an interesting and a complicated study. He is the resultant point of the combined action of forces widely scattered in time and place. He is not only a fresh and natural presentment of the peculiar type of nationality to which he belongs, but he reveals characteristic family traits that may be traced back to bygone generations; in speech, in gesture, in his whole ensemble, he is a faithful living portrait of his country and of his ancestry. Then, together with this, every boy has, in a more or less marked degree, the elements of barbarism. In fact, he is a barbarian without knowing it. His irreflection, his overpowering impulses, his fits of generosity, his reverence for imagined heroes—all these are traits of barbarism and they harmoniously blend with his racial and genealogical characteristics.

The boy is a frolicsome cartoon of the nation to which he belongs. The French boy, with his air of abandon, cries out in the morning: "Oh, where is my ball?" The German boy, with military gait and lineal countenance, is already an embryo soldier. The English boy, with his lordly mien and his hands in his pockets, shows already the meekness of those of whom it is said: "The meek shall possess the land." But the American boy stands apart from all the rest. The rapid development of some of his faculties above the others, the curious twists and turns in his moral cosmos, and the extraordinary combination of opposite forces that he exhibits, place him on a high pedestal in the museum of juvenile types.

The first thing in the American boy that strikes the casual observer is the old-fashioned seriousness of his nature. In other

national playgrounds, whether in Europe or in Australia, the boy just loosed from school is as frisky as a colt on a frosty morning. He romps and plays wanton tricks on his companions through sheer excess of animal spirits. But the American boy either trudges like a man of business to the nearest car for home, or walks naturally to his special haunts of sport or pleasure. Any acceleration of movement is not so much from animal spirits as from the sober judgment that he has to be at a given spot in a given time.

The same absence of animal *esprit* shows itself in other ways. No game is played without a certain amount of previous calculation and careful weighing of the respective merits of the combatants. Much activity may be shown during the game itself, but in the short intervals of the game when, for example, it is a question of fetching the ball gone beyond the boundary, the slowness and carelessness of movement are almost provoking. Such distinctions made between movements that belong to the game and those that do not clearly show that the game is not so much a relief to an overflow of animal excitement as a series of conscious and deliberate efforts.

The extent to which hazing is carried may be regarded as another illustration in point. Bullying is fairly common both in the English and in the continental schools. Usually, however, it is instinctive and unpremeditated. In America it is accompanied by a considerable amount of forethought and conscious will-power. Instinct by itself is powerful, but when accompanied by deliberate effort it becomes still more so; hence the systematic thoroughness that characterizes the American hazing.

Together with this seriousness of the character of the American boy, there is another remarkable characteristic, and that is his precocity. The practical judgment of the American boy is far more developed than that of his English cousin. He is quick in seeing the practical side of things, in acknowledging the *fait accompli*, and in devising expedients to obtain what he wants. He is also quick in sizing up the qualities of those with whom he comes into contact. These natural gifts are perhaps not altogether compatible with childlike reverence, but they do certainly

form a strong basis on which to build his commercial success in after-life.

The American boy is serious, precociously practical; and these qualities largely account for the spirit of independence that he manifests. All over America professors in colleges and in universities bewail the lack of obedience—that the American boy has no idea of doing anything he does not like. Perhaps it is a pity that the boy should thus anticipate the privileges of adult manhood, but there is a compensation. The American boys in a college show in a remarkable degree what Aristotle calls the power of self-restraint. It is true that they are alive to the fact that they or their parents pay the salary upon which the existence of the college and professors depends, and that they are not slow to exercise this power of the purse, but rarely do they abuse it. The European boy or the English boy, placed in similar circumstances of liberty, would run wild; but among American boys there already exists a certain tradition of order and restraint. The discipline of a college, unlike that in the old country, depends more upon this tradition, and upon a half-sort of understanding among the pupils themselves, than upon any external coercion.

This certainly is one of the most promising features of the American boy, and it shows itself also in the laboring classes. The average American workman, for self-restraint, for courtesy, far exceeds his compeer in the Old World. Again, an American crowd also exhibits the same high qualities of order and self-restraint.

There is one peculiar trait in the American boy which not only saves him from a great deal of unhappiness, but also fits him for very high work in the future. He has no nerves. In this respect he is like the Japanese who can sleep soundly in the midst of sudden and most untoward noises. Not only is he obtuse to shocks of a physical nature, but his mental susceptibilities are not easily aroused. He seems to have been fitted out by nature with intellectual oilskins. Rough abuse, pungent sarcasm, are turned off like arrows from the hide of a rhinoceros, and only a smile greets the thrower of the dart.

Though the American living in a variable climate may be

swayed by his emotions, he is certainly not liable to that inconstancy that proceeds from the action of outward trivial circumstances. The imperturbability of the American character has been remarked, it has been impersonated on the stage, and it is very conspicuous even in the boy.

But it would be a mistake to suppose that the American boy is hard and callous. Perhaps for the very reason that he is not emotional, his moral virtues have a more practical character. He is ever ready to forget and to forgive, and one can often see him performing really self-sacrificing acts for those to whom he owes but little in the way of kindness. But these acts of generosity are done in a typical Yankee matter-of-fact sort of way.

Regarding religion, many are curious to know whether the Yankee lad has any religion at all. No doubt the Yankee lad would resent any scrutinizing or criticism on this heading as not pertaining to other people's business. A boy's conscience is a more subtle thing than one would imagine, and in the case of the American boy the thick curtain of bluff and adult secretiveness has to be lifted up. But it is sometimes permissible to view him at his acts of private devotion, and even here to a mere casual observer he seems to show the same business-like spirit and easy imperturbability. In fact, he would seem to regard his spiritual exercises as a series of short jobs performed under supernal supervision. There is none of that hushed awe and emotionalism that the English schoolboy shows before any important religious function. Still, if bad deeds are avoided and good ones performed, much will have been accomplished.

On the whole, the American boy has many attractive features, but he requires careful and considerate handling. It is easy to pander to his defects and to fail to bring out those high, sterling qualities with which he is naturally fitted.

Unfortunately the self-reliance of the American boy somewhat precludes him from the advice of those who are older and more experienced than himself. Any rash intrusions upon his confidence and the door would be shut in our faces. But a gentle reserve and appeal to the reasonableness of his nature will always elicit a response. Anyhow, the American is not amenable to the iron hand, even though it be cased in the velvet glove.